



Finding a Voice in Art ArtStarts in Schools

Courtesy ArtStarts in Schools

by
David A. Serpa
Communications Assistant
BCPVPA

ArtStarts began in 1996 as a grassroots initiative to bring the transformative power of the arts to young people in BC. Over time, it has grown with the collaboration of artists, volunteers, families, and donors across the province, and because of critical support from partners including the BC Arts Council and the City of Vancouver.

ArtStarts is now a leading organization for young people exploring their creativity. It provides opportunities for artists to get into schools, and helps school administrators in getting students involved with the arts. Their model is about helping match schools with artists for specific projects.

Jules André-Brown, Co-Director of Programming, explains; “We have artist performances in schools, as well as artist residencies where an artist is in the school for multiple weeks, working on a specific project with students. Whether it’s a series of performances or a long-term project, the students get some meaningful interactions, and see new ways of expressing themselves.”

ArtStarts is somewhat curriculum-driven, in that artists often communicate with schools about their needs. However, their programs do not grade students in any way; instead, they provide an exploration of creativity and help young people form a new approach to the world.

By seeing the work of a professional artist, students can take a new perspective, or learn an important way of listening to a different style of music or poetry.

Artists in Schools



Courtesy ArtStarts in Schools

Luisa Henz is an artist and the founder of recently formed project **SoundMind Introspective Arts**, which is funded through grants from ArtStarts in Schools.

SoundMind is an arts based, community-building program that facilitates game-centered, applied theatre and movement workshops. Luisa collaborates with facilitators such as Braulio Vidal, a trained actor from Chile, and Warren Hooley, a facilitation expert and workshop trainer. SoundMind has facilitated multi-session workshops for students in Grades 2-12 in Metro Vancouver schools.

Their school workshops promote collaborative problem-solving, creative risk-taking, and social-emotional awareness skills. They bring social justice dialogue to life through student-directed theatre, sparking discussions on important topics such as mental health, cyberbullying and belonging. Students also learn self-regulating relaxation strategies through Luisa's meditative soundscape journeys using her Handpan instrument.

Workshops encourage students to assume leadership and steer the direction of the sessions. “We have no strict agenda on discussion topics,” says Luisa. “We hear different student voices and simply facilitate discussion, aiming to include voices that can often feel left out.”

When asked what students will take home from SoundMind workshops, Luisa says, “I believe (youth) are hyper-connected, yet this does not always help them genuinely connect to themselves or others. Our workshops are designed to slow down social interactions, strengthen new perspective-taking capacities, and build multiple avenues for self-reflection through the arts.”

Luisa is currently an artist-in-residence at St. John's School in Vancouver, where she works with teachers and counsellors to facilitate arts-based social and emotional learning for their students, while expanding her SoundMind program to other public schools with the help of ArtStarts grants.

Experiencing ArtStarts

**Principal
Sean Della Vedova,
SD 43 (Coquitlam)**

Why does your school work with ArtStarts?

I have had a long relationship with ArtStarts because I have confidence in the quality of the artists with whom they work. The performances and projects offered by ArtStarts are created with school settings in mind.

What program(s) has your school accessed through ArtStarts?

At every school where I have been Principal, we have typically had three to four performances per year. We have also worked with individual artists to create in-house residency opportunities for students. I would say that there has been a recent move toward having students being involved more directly with workshops and hands-on experiences.

“There is something unique about being with an artist who is uncovering their process,” says Jules. Artists break down their process so that students can understand and learn. Students often walk away with a new skill, even if at a beginner level.

In his own academic work, Jules has seen how young people see themselves in arts organizations. Many of their reflections were about how, in school, they felt pressure to create art that either satisfied the requirements of the class or related to some sort of future job opportunity.

ArtStarts programs take different approaches to different subjects; students can learn about their own culture or other cultures through dance, and learn about the importance of expressing culture in that way. Students will often hear powerful stories about a culture, with learning that is far beyond what they might learn from a textbook.

Many artists have a package they have developed, and a program that they have worked on, to explore a particular theme. When a school administrator is booking a performance, they can review these materials to ensure that there is a fit.

During performances, artists explain a concept and walk students through the idea. The programs are about 45 minutes, followed by a Q&A and some participation, if appropriate. The residency model is a longer process involving various sessions. Students build trust with the artist in the classroom. It is an educational experience that is different from having a teacher.

ArtStarts focuses on anti-oppression, which has allowed many young people to have a voice in places where it may not be easy for them to speak out.

**“There is something unique
about being with an artist
who is uncovering
their process.”**

“We don’t just want to define ourselves by what we stand against, but also by what we stand for,” says Jules. “That’s youth empowerment – empowerment for young people to have expression, critical thinking, and cultural resonance.

For every community we visit, we need those artists and school administrators to think about the instruments of anti-oppression and empowerment that may be most valuable there, and how we can cultivate and support that, because every context is unique.”

In speaking about how Principals can support arts, Jules says; “For Principals that are fairly new to integrating arts in their schools, it’s really helpful when they can bring the power of arts and culture into the school’s overarching pedagogy, when they champion how arts can fit into the organization and its strategy, and when they can provide a secure foundation for an artistic and cultural space.”

For Jules, Principals are well-suited to helping students find their confidence with the arts. There are communities where school leaders already have confidence and capacity, and are well poised to be leaders in the arts even beyond the school. Arts can be the catalyst to redefining a neighborhood, to “redefining a postal code” says Jules, quoting US educator Amir Whitaker. “Arts can give young people a voice to create the story of their neighborhood.”

“The school is so well positioned to define what a neighborhood is, what a community is about.

If young people can define their communities, then you see the evidence in the parks, in the stores, in the library. When the Principals are promoting the arts beyond the school, the impact is really meaningful.

“Arts can give young people a voice to create the story of their neighborhood.”

How do their programs align with your school’s action plan for learning?

Our social and emotional learning goal involves self-regulation strategies. I believe that the creative process has an inherent focus on assisting students with their ability to have agency and control over their learning. Playing a drum, painting a picture, or moulding a bowl requires focus and awareness: these are important aspects of self-regulation!

How do you see ArtStarts impacting students’ lives or learning experiences?

Students sometimes might not see themselves as having arts skills. It can be intimidating looking at the work of artists. By showing students the thought process, art becomes a less mysterious and ambiguous process for a learner.

One of my most meaningful school projects involved an ArtStarts grant. The project created a forest inside the school foyer. Working with a potter, students created leaves and bugs that lived in our forest. The result captured the life of a living forest. Students were truly the artists for this project and their thoughts and feelings guided the act of creation and the final product.

Has Art Starts inspired your school community to promote leadership and advocacy for arts in education?

I attend the ArtStarts Showcase annually on behalf of our school district.

Many districts have representation so performances can be coordinated between more isolated communities. Bringing these performances to schools is such an important part of creating school arts cultures and offering students ways to express themselves. My goal in becoming a school administrator was to promote and to ensure that students had opportunities to engage with the arts.

Why would you encourage other school leaders to get involved with ArtStarts?

Each year, I distribute internally the list of artists being presented by ArtStarts.

There is always a buzz in the school when there is a performance scheduled or workshops offered. Teachers do an amazing job offering opportunities for artistic expression, but having someone from outside of the school community come and create with students is another important aspect of the artistic process.

If young people can define their communities, then you see the evidence in the parks, in the stores, in the library. When the Principals are promoting the arts beyond the school, the impact is really meaningful. So, there's both internal and external work that Principals can do.

"Where there isn't an arts infrastructure in place, we recognize that one is needed. I've seen incredible practices come from regions with few resources". ArtStarts is committed to responding to these different contexts.

To illustrate, Jules tells the story of a community with a strong agricultural practice that integrated weaving corn husks into creating an art practice for children.

"When the Principals are promoting the arts beyond the school, the impact is really meaningful."

"So, rather than assuming you need to build the same arts infrastructure you see in Vancouver or bigger cities, you can also work with what's available in the community."

Bigger cities have plays, concerts, festivals, and many other cultural events, where small communities may not have the same kind of access.

ArtStarts believes that people can engage in the arts, no matter their resources. "We try to be sympathetic and to find ways of accommodating performances, as many artists are flexible and want to find ways to help those communities."

If you would like to bring an artist from ArtStarts into your school, you can look at their artist directory on their website to learn about their specific offering and see if it matches your school's or class's needs.

Find out more

artstarts



artstarts.com



@artstarts



@artstarts



/artstarts

ArtStarts in Schools is a charitable organization that expands the role of art in education to activate learning and nurture creativity in British Columbia's young people.

Since 1996, ArtStarts has collaborated with educators, artists, families and community to promote art as an essential part of learning and life.

ArtStarts' key areas of activity include booking school performances, an annual showcase conference for young audience presenters, artist residencies, grants to schools and districts, professional learning opportunities for artists and teachers, gallery exhibitions of young people's art and free family programming.

From Kindergarten to Grade 12, in public and private schools throughout the province, ArtStarts supports a wide range of arts based experiences that activate learning for young people.

